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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000210

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NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST ASSAULTED BY SECURITY FORCES

REF: A. TUNIS 169
[1](#)B. 07 TUNIS 1566

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On March 3, human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine was assaulted by security forces upon her arrival in Tunisia at the port of La Goulette. Bensedrine, a longstanding critic of Tunisia's human rights situation, had just returned from Denmark where she received the 2008 Danish Peace Foundation Peace Prize. Security forces detained Bensedrine and her husband, journalist Omar Mestiri, for six hours, and confiscated over sixty copies of various documentaries (including a recently completed report on torture). When Bensedrine attempted to call her attorney, her phone was confiscated and her arm was injured in the process. Bensedrine and Mestiri plan to file a complaint with the police. The Ambassador raised Bensedrine's case with External Communications Director Oussama Romdhani and the French Ambassador. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Sihem Bensedrine and her husband, journalist Omar Mestiri, were met by Tunisian security forces on March 3 as their ferry docked at the Port of La Goulette. Bensedrine was returning from Denmark, where she received the 2008 Peace Prize from the Danish Peace Foundation. She told PolOff on March 7 that she and her husband were met by a sizable group of plainclothes and uniformed police officers who attempted to seize her laptop and confiscated various documents. According to Bensedrine and Mestiri, among the items seized were over sixty copies of a documentary Bensedrine had recently produced on torture in Tunisia and several computer disks. Mestiri and Bensedrine told PolOff that they were taken to a room where they were detained for approximately four hours. Bensedrine attempted to call her attorney, but security forces hit her and her husband and forcibly removed her cell phone, injuring her hand in the process. Bensedrine and her husband said that they were finally allowed to leave the port six hours later, upon which they went straight to the hospital. Bensedrine told PolOff that her hand had been badly sprained.

[1](#)3. (C) While this was not the first time Bensedrine has been searched upon her arrival in Tunisia, or had materials confiscated, Bensedrine and Mestiri agreed that the episode on March 3 was markedly more aggressive than those in the past. Bensedrine told PolOff that on previous occasions, security forces were polite and gave her a letter documenting items seized as is required by law. On March 3, officers were physically abusive, and refused to give her written documentation of the items they had confiscated. The couple

was subjected to body searches, and the content of their laptop was copied. Bensedrine said that officers did not comment on why they had decided to search her and her husband, but speculated that it was either because of the documentary on torture that she was transporting or because of the publicity surrounding her recent peace prize win. She and her husband visited an attorney on March 7 to file a complaint with the police, but are skeptical that it will be pursued by authorities.

¶4. (C) The March 3 incident has been strongly condemned by a number of international NGOs, including Reporters Without Borders and the Observatory for the Freedom of Press, Publishing, and Creation in Tunisia (OLPEC). The Ambassador expressed concern about the GOT's treatment of Bensedrine's in a meeting with External Communications Director Oussama Romdhani. He also raised this matter with the French Ambassador. As part of her ongoing human rights promotion efforts, Bensedrine will be in New York from March 15 - 19 to attend a session of the United Nations, and she will testify before the UN in Geneva on April 8 as part of the UN's human rights review of Tunisia.

Comment

¶5. (C) Stories such as Bensedrine's are unfortunately not infrequent in Tunisia, though most activists do not enjoy her international standing. Bensedrine's reception in La Goulette, combined with the recent arrest and prosecution of journalist Slim Boukhdhir and comedian Hedi Ouled Baballah (reftels) may indicate a more aggressive campaign against outspoken critics of the government. Cases like these belie the GOT's oft-repeated claim that respect for human rights is entrenched in Tunisia. End Comment.
GODEC